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Hope for SALT II

The visit to Moscow last week of Sen. Charles Percy, R-Ill., the likely chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee in the next Senate, revealed that the Soviets are at least immensely curious about the new president and willing to give his positions a hearing.

And Percy's recommendation on his return, that the Reagan administration begin early arms talks with the Russians, elicited a positive response from Reagan's advisers.

All this is encouraging and welcome. But by all current indications, reviving arms control talks is far down the list of Reagan's priorities. None of Reagan's top defense and foreign policy advisers has been sympathetic to arms control.

Early reports of the work of the transition panels say that most of their effort is going into shaping a program of rapid expansion of American military power. So far there is little sign that much attention is being paid to how an arms build-up will affect the chances of later disarmament talks.

Meanwhile, the Russians are watching carefully, keeping open the door for new negotiations. Publicly they are standing firm for the ratification of SALT II.

If talks are reopened, though, they will almost certainly move to expand the scope of discussions to include the U.S. nuclear systems in Europe, such as the FB-111 fighter-bombers, which are capable of hitting the Soviet Union.

Previous administrations have worked diligently to keep these weapons out of arms negotiations (in fact, recent Geneva talks on theater nuclear weapons in Europe have foundered on precisely this issue), and it would be surprising if Reagan were to act any differently. It took seven years for three administrations to get SALT II, a new agreement would be even more difficult.

Reagan's desire to delay formulating a new SALT approach until after he has set a framework for U.S. military policy is understandable. If there were any chance the review of U.S. strategic posture would result in anything other than a recommendation to build more bombs and missiles, we would sympathize the effort to put first things first.

But while Reagan's advisers contemplate a big arms build-up, the sands are running out on arms control.

Unless the new administration makes an early pledge to abide by the limits of SALT II and reopens talks with the Russians to correct the treaty problems Reagan sees, the Soviets, whose five-year plan is expected to be set out in February, might respond to U.S. arms build-up by deploying nuclear weapons beyond the SALT II ceilings. According to the CIA, the Russians could have as many as 8,000 more ICBM warheads by 1989, an increase of 200 percent over their current total.

Such a massive increase in the Soviet arsenal would hardly contribute to U.S. security. It would almost certainly doom any further propects for arms negotiations. No American military counter-effort could hope in the short run to match an unrestrained Soviet build-up. That is why the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with minor reservations, have supported the SALT II treaty.

Perhaps, as president, confronted for the first time with advice from outside his narrow circle, Reagan will begin to understand why his predecessors considered arms control negotiations essential.

Perhaps, discovering how difficult it is to wring concessions out of the Soviets, he will begin to see the virtues of SALT II and find a way to make it politically palatable to its Senate opponents.